

Territories of Critique in Psychology: Lübeck Colloquium on Psychological Humanities

Citation for published version (APA):

Smolka, M. (2017). Territories of Critique in Psychology: Lübeck Colloquium on Psychological Humanities. *H-Soz-Kult*.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2017

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
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- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

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Territories of Critique in Psychology: Lübeck Colloquium on Psychological Humanities

Veranstalter: Viola Balz, University of Applied Sciences for Social Work, Education and Nursing, Dresden; Lisa Malich, Institute for the History of Medicine and Science Studies, University Lübeck

Datum, Ort: 14.09.2017–15.09.2017, Lübeck

Bericht von: Mareike Smolka, University Maastricht

„Territories of Critique in Psychology“ – the image of politicized spaces with rigid boundaries in which different parties follow their own agendas arises when reflecting upon the notion of „territory“ in the title of the Lübeck Colloquium. The organizers, LISA MALICH (Lübeck) and VIOLA BALZ (Dresden), attempted to draw these boundaries in their opening speech in order to establish three territories of critique. They distinguished between critical voices from *within* and those from *outside* mainstream psychology. The latter were either psychologists developing alternative psychologies, some of which even explicitly called themselves ‘critical’, such as the Marxist-oriented „Critical Psychology“ (Holzkamp, 1983)¹, or they were raised outside academia by those concerned with psychological applications.

To illustrate the boundary between the scientific discipline of mainstream psychology and critical thinkers on the fringes, photographs by Mamie Phipps Clark and Michel Foucault were juxtaposed on the colloquium website. The American psychologist Clark criticized racial segregation in schools from *within* the field of psychology by drawing the conclusion from her famous doll study that discrimination and segregation caused black children to develop a sense of inferiority and self-hatred.² Foucault, in contrast, was presented as criticizing psychology from the *outside* by looking through the glasses of a historian. Narrating a „History of Madness“³, Foucault shed a critical light on how the language of psychiatry at the end of the 18th century constructed madness as a mental illness solely to be cured in confined and controlled medical institutions.

As a critical historian *outside* the field of psychology, Foucault does not belong to any of the three territories of critique outlined by the organizers of the colloquium. He seems to be part of a fourth territory that is *outside* mainstream psychology but *within* academia or, more specifically, *within* the humanities. However, Foucault did not only approach psychology from the perspective of a humanities scholar. His „History of Madness“ stems from his experiences working in a mental hospital after obtaining a degree in psychology and briefly considering a career in psychiatry.⁴ As a *boundary figure*⁵ that appeared in the guise of the historian and of the psychologist, Foucault’s persona demonstrates the flexibility of boundaries separating psychology from other disciplines in the humanities.

Drawing on contributions from scholars working at the interface of psychology and any discipline of the humanities as well as from experts in the humanities who critically reflect upon psychology, it was this inter- or transdisciplinary territory of critique that the organizers of the colloquium intended to establish. To lay the foundation of the so-called „Psychological Humanities“, speakers from different fields in the humanities and psychology, most of them might be considered as *boundary figures*, were invited to either criticize psychology or to historicize and systematize critiques of the field. Critique took the shape of a mode of inquiry to understand the field of psychology in all its complexity by highlighting its embedding in political, eco-

¹ Klaus Holzkamp, *Grundlegung der Psychologie*, Frankfurt am Main 1983.

² Alexandra Rutherford, Clark, Mamie Phipps, Oxford 2014, in: American national biography online, <http://www.anb.org/articles/14/14-01179.html> (26.10.2017).

³ Michel Foucault / Jean Khalifa (Hrsg.) / Jonathan Murphy (Üb.), *History of Madness*, New York 2006.

⁴ Gary Gutting / Edward N. Zalta (Hrsg.), Michel Foucault, 2013, in: The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/#4> (26.10.2017).

⁵ The notion of the boundary figure is used in reference to the concept of the „boundary object“, an object that changes its epistemological and ontological nature depending on the context in which it occurs (Thomas F. Gieryn, *Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science: strains and interests in professional ideologies of scientists*, in: *American Sociological Review* (1983), pp. 781–795).

nomic, cultural and other social power structures.

The first speaker THOMAS TEO (Toronto) engaged in this mode of critique in order to reclaim subjectivity as a core concern for the discipline of psychology. Subjectivity had been ruled out of mainstream psychology considering it a private affair that was inaccessible to the strict demands of objective science. In suggesting that a topic such as subjectivity required an interrogation from the perspective of the humanities, the arts, and the qualitative social sciences, Teo took the first step in the process of constituting the Psychological Humanities. He asserted the need for such a field to develop a broader understanding of subjectivity that could not be gained alone if approached from one single angle. He traversed the boundary between psychology and the humanities by shifting the intellectual gaze from hypothesis-testing to asking questions about mental life. How has subjectivity been achieved historically? How do society and culture contribute to the construction of the subject? What is the role of gender when approaching subjectivity as an embodied practice?

Questions about the role of gender also resided at the core of the contributions from feminist historians to the project of the Psychological Humanities. ALEXANDRA RUTHERFORD (Toronto) reflected upon the relationship between feminism and psychology and how the different forms of this relationship had affected psychologists' engagement with gender. In reference to the three territories of critique in psychology, she swiftly introduced her tripartite framework of feminism and/in/as psychology. Focusing on feminism *in* psychology, Rutherford introduced Dr. Joyce Brothers as an example of a feminist psychologist who reinforced traditionally gendered subjectivities, rather than disrupting them. Pioneering media psychology by dispensing psychological advice on television, Dr. Joyce Brothers became the face of American psychology between the 1950s and 1990s. She reified the idea that women's happiness could be found in marriage and motherhood by idealizing what she called a „liberated marriage“ in which women should pay attention to their own needs while caring

for husband and family.

SUSANNE SCHMIDT (Cambridge) presented another take on feminism *in* psychology by shedding light on feminist researchers who refuted the notion of a midlife crisis as a universal development stage in the 1980s. Her historical analysis revealed how feminist ideas about the life course were accepted with restrictions, as theories about women only. Schmidt criticized the boundary within psychology that marginalized feminist psychologists as making claims exclusively about women and gender differences limiting their impact in the academic discourse. Moving from feminism *in* psychology to feminism *and* psychology, NORA RUCK (Vienna) presented her investigation of the relationship between the Austrian feminist activist movement „Aktion Unabhängiger Frauen“ and the scientific discipline of psychology. As a consequence of their critique of the sexism and androcentrism in psychology and psychotherapy, the activists founded feminist therapy centers, authored scientific articles, and taught at universities. Despite their scientifically oriented activities, they did not become an institutionalized force within psychology but remained in the periphery to destabilize the boundaries surrounding academic psychology.

The destabilization of boundaries was also the implicit topic of DAVID KELLER'S (Lübeck) contribution concerning the scientific discourse on psychotherapy's side effects that evolved in the early 2000s. This discourse might be interpreted as an attempt to undermine the boundary between psychopharmacology and psychotherapy. The mobilization of the „drug metaphor“ equated psychopharmacology and psychotherapy as equally hazardous and, therefore, equally effective treatments. Keller provided a critical outlook on this development. Although the drug metaphor helped psychotherapy to be acknowledged as offering a potent treatment to patients, it also rendered the psychotherapist accusable for having caused side effects in the process of giving therapy. Ultimately, warning patients of side effects might cause „side effects“ of another kind for those giving therapy, Keller concluded.

Travelling a bit further back in time, VI-

OLA BALZ (Dresden) and MARTIN WIESER (Berlin) provided a critical and in-depth look into the negotiations of responsibility in psychology. Balz demonstrated how health education films produced in the GDR served as a medium to hold alcohol abusers responsible for both their addiction and their cure. Wieser analyzed how psychologists admitted, mitigated or rejected responsibility for their actions within totalitarian systems. He revealed the rhetorical strategies psychologists employed after World War II and after the collapse of the GDR to defend their actions against critical voices blaming them for having failed to live up to their professional and humanist responsibility.

Next to critical historical analyses featuring prominently in the colloquium, the investigation and critique of present-day psychology was presented as a corner stone for the establishment of the Psychological Humanities. The focus on present-day psychology resulted in a thematic shift towards the critical analysis of neuroscience. Nowadays, neuroscientific research dominates psychology consuming a large part of funding available for research in psychology.⁶ Neuroscience, however, is neither embedded in psychology nor completely independent.⁷ As the boundaries between neuroscience and psychology have remained flexible, the critical analysis of neuroscience may be regarded as the task of the Psychological Humanities. During the colloquium, this analysis was performed both by neuroscientists criticizing the field from within, and by an anthropologist whose critique was equally launched from within the neuroscientific laboratory, but from the perspective of an outsider.

The audience was amused by EMILY MARTIN'S (New York) stories of her experiences as a participant in neuroscientific experiments and of her immersion in the work of neuroscientists. She joked about her eagerness to score high in experimental tests and to perform well as a research participant. She shared her astonishment that neuroscientists drew on trained judgment rather than concrete methods when „reading“ an electroencephalogram (EEG), the scribbled lines recording brain waves, to identify if the participant blinked or frowned during an experiment. Yet, how do

these anthropological anecdotes benefit those working in the experimental laboratory? If the Psychological Humanities aim to criticize psychology so as to change it for the better, this inter- or transdisciplinary undertaking also needs to adopt a collaborative form. Those *within* psychology need to collaborate with those *outside* and with the *boundary figures* whose expertise in different disciplines allows them to translate between the two. Such a team may be theoretically and methodologically equipped to deal with the pitfalls that SÖREN KRACH (Lübeck) and BANAFSCHE SAYYAD (Berlin) identified in neuroimaging studies. Based on a literature review of forty publications on studies that had investigated cultural phenomena, Krach concluded that the approaches to culture in these studies were tainted by political attitudes. Culture was equated with skin color or nationality, cultural stereotypes were essentialized by attributing them to a biological foundation, and „Western“ culture was presented as the benchmark in comparisons with „non-Western“ counterparts. In a similar vein, Sayyad pointed out that biologically deterministic concepts of „sex“ and „gender“ underlie neuroscientific research.

The shift towards neuroscience has changed the field of psychology yielding new challenges and developments. In the final discussion of the colloquium speakers who had introduced a feminist perspective described this shift in gendered terms. They suggested that psychology had been feminized as a soft science due to the emancipation efforts of masculine neuroscience equipped with hard methods and heavy technology. Accordingly, the stricter the boundary between neuroscience and psychology, the more psychology moved towards the humanities and embraced different manners of conceptualizing mental life, instead of reducing it to neurons and synapses. Therefore, the speakers of the colloquium agreed that the time was ripe for the establishment of the Psychological Humanities.

Rather than understanding the Psychology-

⁶Gregory A. Miller / Jennifer Keller, Psychology and Neuroscience: Making Peace, in: Current Directions in Psychological Science vol. 9, 6 (2000), pp. 212–215.

⁷Ibid.

ical Humanities as a territory of critique, it should be considered as an endeavor traversing boundaries and opening opportunities for inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations. To critically reflect upon psychology and its political, economic, cultural and social embedding, different perspectives ought to be joined. However, just as side effects may be accompanied by side effects, the critical ambitions of the Psychological Humanities ought to be accompanied by a critique. Reflecting upon a critique of the critique, one might raise different questions: Can the various interests of those participating in the project of the Psychological Humanities be combined under this new label so as to engage in mutually beneficial collaborations? Are there power differentials between intellectuals from distinct disciplines that could impede these collaborations? Whose voices have so far been neglected but need to be included to critically reflect upon the field of psychology in all its complexity?

Conference overview:

Welcome & Opening Remarks:

Lisa Malich (Lübeck) / Viola Balz (Dresden)

Keynote I:

Thomas Teo (Toronto): Beyond natural-scientific psychology: The relevance of the psychological humanities for a general theory of subjectivity

PANEL I: Territories of Gender in Psychology

Chair: Lisa Malich

Nora Ruck (Vienna): Feminist psychologies as cultures of critique: Between activism and academia

Anna Sieben (Bochum): Thoughts on the psychologisation of everyday life on the example of attachment parenting in Germany and Turkey

Susanne Schmidt (Cambridge): Why Women Don't Have a Midlife Crisis: Feminist Theories of psychological development

Keynote II:

Alexandra Rutherford (Toronto): Feminism, gender, and cultures of critique in psychology: Historical and theoretical considerations

PANEL II: Territories of Mental Health and

Psychotherapy

Chair: Sascha Topp (Berlin)

Viola Balz (Dresden): The Self as Risk: From the Critique of Psychotherapy to the Prevention of Mental Disorders, 1960-1990

David Keller (Lübeck): From 'no effects' to 'side effects'. Exploring the discourse on psychotherapy's effectiveness in the age of psychopharmacology

Lotta Fiedel (Oldenburg): Critique of psychotherapy – psychotherapy as critique? (*cancelled*)

PANEL III: Epistemological Territories of Academic Psychology

Chair: Carola Ossmer (Lüneburg)

Martin Wieser (Berlin): The „Surgeon's Knife“ – Cultures of Justification and Critique in the History of Psychology

Birgit Stammberger (Lübeck): 'Freud Is Not a Psychologist!': Purification Work in the History of Psychology (*cancelled*)

Keynote III:

Emily Martin (New York): Objectivity and trained judgement: Toward and ethnography of experimental psychology

Panel IV: Contemporary Territories of Critique

Chair: Viola Balz (Dresden)

Sören Krach (Lübeck): The Uncanny Return of the Race Concept in Cultural Neuroscience

Banafsche Sayyad (Berlin): I Can See the Sex in your Brain! Concepts of Gender in Contemporary Neuropsychological Studies with fMRT

Keynote IV:

Morten Nissen (Copenhagen): Motivation – a User-Driven and Aesthetic Critique

Comments on the Presentations:

Cornelius Borck (Lübeck): Do Psychological Humanities Already Exist?

Final Discussion:

Lisa Malich (Lübeck)

Tagungsbericht *Territories of Critique in Psychology: Lübeck Colloquium on Psychological Humanities*. 14.09.2017–15.09.2017, Lübeck, in: H-

Soz-Kult 03.11.2017.